

Safety Corner

What is Vision Zero?

Accidents at work and occupational diseases are neither predetermined nor unavoidable – there are always causes. The premise of zero-harm is that all accidents, incidents, and occupational illnesses have a cause, and are therefore preventable by building a strong prevention culture. The zero-harm concept is not intended to mean that people will not suffer minor injuries, but the purpose is to remove anyone suffering serious injury or death. One such approach is the campaign ‘Vision Zero,’ led by the International Social Security Association (ISSA).

The ISSA’s Vision Zero concept is flexible and can be adjusted to the specific safety, health or well-being priorities for prevention in any given context, and is beneficial to any workplace, enterprise or industry in all regions of the world. The Vision Zero strategy is not prescriptive; organisations can determine their own designs and implementation plans to suit their organisations following the seven golden rules:

1. Take leadership – demonstrate commitment
2. Identify hazards – control risks
3. Define targets – develop programmes
4. Ensure a safe and healthy system –be well-organised
5. Ensure safety and health in machines, equipment and workplaces
6. Improve qualifications – develop competence
7. Invest in people – motivate by participation

A criticism directed at zero-harm is that, without a clear set of processes and steps in place to try to achieve the goal, it provides little more than a lofty unachievable goal with emotional underpinnings. However, if an organisation seeks to achieve zero-harm by any means, it might implement overly-onerous safety management systems. These systems might not be proportionate to the level of risk in the organisation; they might also be detrimental to safety culture as employees see the systems as an obstacle to productivity.

Organisations may also misunderstand the zero-harm approach is for all injuries and set unachievable objectives accordingly. This can potentially lead organisations to argue that zero injury is the only target an organisation should set. The argument against setting such a stringent objective is that it implies anything short of perfection is unacceptable and may lead to a sense of demoralisation when even a minor injury is sustained. This would also increase the likelihood of under-reporting and reduce opportunities to learn from incidents.

The Safety Corner is contributed by Ir Prof Vincent Ho, who can be contacted at vsho@UCLA.edu.